

By JOHN BLAKEY

→ Coaching highly-driven top executives takes a special type of coach. There is no rulebook and the first hour of the pitch is critical for success. How can the conversation be steered into benign territory?

ALPHA MAMMALIANS ARE found at or near the top of FTSE-250 or equivalent public-sector organisations. They are driven individuals with a short attention span and a challenging demeanour. Used to getting what they want, alpha mammals set ambitious goals for themselves and are stalked by a deep fear of failure. Their diaries are manic, with reflection time squeezed to a minimum and stress levels sky high. They find this strangely addictive.

The environment of these lonely predators is characterised by short-term financial goals and relentlessly demanding shareholders. Money is the mantra and all success is measured in this unforgiving currency.

It takes an unusual type of coach to work successfully with alpha mammals. Often the rulebook needs to be torn up and the phrase “dancing in the moment” assumes a new and vaguely terrifying relevance.

It is particularly important to build credibility and respect immediately. The first hour is critical.

### Well-polished medals

When entering the spacious office of the alpha mammalian, quickly establish credibility by using the client’s drug of choice: worldly achievements. If you listen carefully you will hear an unspoken question from behind the desk: “Who the hell are you?”

This is not the time for false modesty. It is a time for puffing out your chest to display proudly whatever worldly “medals” you possess. You may have been a director yourself in a previous life. You may be a professor or have written a book, you may be president of your local bowls



Adam Howling

society. Whatever you have achieved, now is the time to put it on the table so you can demonstrate how you empathise with those whose sense of identity is so closely associated with their achievements.

### Make it work

- Prepare your personal “elevator pitch” – a 30-second soundbite that establishes your credibility in language the alpha mammalian respects and understands.
- Remember that impressions are created not just from words but from how you say them. Rehearse your elevator pitch in front of someone you

respect and get feedback on tone as well as content.

- Dress “one level up” from your audience to convey respect and authority.

### Fatal flaws

- Playing down your achievements out of politeness or false modesty.
- Arriving unprepared with no background to relate to the alpha mammalian’s achievements or those of the organisation.

### External and inner authority

A courageous coaching presence can neutralise the fear surrounding authority. As coaches we are trained to

# “This is the time to switch on the powers of the right brain – cutting through the reductionist, linear logic with a well-aimed intuitive strike”

detach from the outcome of a coaching session so that we free up our energies to be fully present for the client.

Nowhere is this attribute challenged more deeply than in the presence of the alpha mammalian. You have lots to lose if this coaching session does not go well – your reputation, fees, future sponsorship in the organisation, and self-esteem. All who surround the alpha mammalian experience the same fear and trepidation.

In practice this means that early on in the coaching cycle your inner authority will be challenged. There will be a moment when you have the choice to become yet another fawning acolyte bowing to the external authority of the alpha mammalian, or take a deep breath and quietly but courageously state the truth as you are experiencing it.

Only when you meet that moment will you know whether you are sufficiently detached from your own need to achieve and succeed to coach individuals of this ilk.

## **Make it work**

- Expect to be pushed by the alpha mammalian into doing something you might not want to do. Embrace this opportunity to deliver a polite and respectful “no”.
- Before the first session, ask yourself: “What is the worst that could happen?” Then ask yourself: “What would be far worse than that in the scheme of things?” If in doubt and feeling scared,

imagine the alpha mammalian with no clothes on – this works wonders.

## **Fatal flaws**

- Approaching the alpha mammalian with the belief system that says “the customer is always right”.
- Winning the work at any cost.

## **The intuitive knock-out punch**

This is about how the right brain can disarm an adroit sparring partner. The alpha mammalian will dazzle you with their intellect, reeling off facts and figures like a talking encyclopedia.

In my experience, it is a mistake to compete with this left brain wizard. This is because a) you will not win, and b) even being tempted to compete will undermine your inner authority.

Instead, this is the time to switch on the awesome powers of the right brain – cutting through the jungle of reductionist, linear logic with a single yet well-aimed intuitive strike. Such a blow will often disarm the alpha mammalian to such a degree that they will take some time to come to their senses. In that time they may see a completely new facet of the situation.

How is that intuition best expressed? Sometimes it might be humour that bypasses the ego’s defences, sometimes your body might instinctively take the lead to touch their elbow, sometimes a poetic phrase or picture might spring to mind that has no scientific basis but that hints unerringly at the truth.

There are many creative options at the coach’s disposal should you have the courage to take the plunge.

## **Make it work**

- Work in parallel with the intellect, the emotions and the body.
- Mismatch the alpha mammalian by choosing emotive responses to intellectual statements or questions.
- If in doubt, remember that humour is the best medicine.

## **Fatal flaws**

- Competing with the alpha mammalian on an intellectual plane.
- Mistaking intellectual prowess for great leadership.

## **Benign territory**

Navigating these steps successfully will accelerate the trust-building process with this cautious and well-defended client. The coaching relationship can then move beyond this combative phase into more benign territory.

If all else fails, fall back on the words and guidance of a coaching guru from history. Someone whose inner authority was demonstrated by an extreme example, who was prone to alarming intuitive insights and whose worldly medals shone so brightly they were called miracles: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves.” ■

## **Further information**

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### **Further reading:**

- K Ludeman and E Erlandson, “Coaching the alpha male”, in *Harvard Business Review*, 82(5), p58, May 2004.
- K Patterson, J Grenny, R McMillan and A Switzler, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High*, McGraw-Hill, 2002.